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Reflections on the French School of Counter-Rebellion: An Interview with Etienne de Durand

by Octavian Manea

How important were Charles Lacheroy and Roger Trinquier in shaping the French School of COIN compared to David Galula?

There was much debate and opposition within the French Army regarding the proper answers to *guerre révolutionnaire*, and no single school of thought ever prevailed. If there is such a thing as the French School of Counterinsurgency, its founding father undoubtedly is Charles Lacheroy, and with him the proponents of DGR (*doctrine de guerre révolutionnaire* or French Counterinsurgency Doctrine) to include Jacques Hogard. During the French Indochina and Algeria wars, they were extremely influential towards French policy and strategy leading conferences and lectures, contributing to doctrinal manuals, and advising on day-to-day operations. Lacheroy, for instance, had high-level contacts within the government and was able to implement his views in 1957, with the creation of 5^e *bureaux* all over Algeria and the generalization of *guerre psychologique* (psychwar or psychological operations).

Roger Trinquier is at first more of a practitioner. He wrote on COIN at the end of the period and should therefore only in retrospect be included as a central, yet not foundational, figure of French COIN.

Contrastingly, David Galula was an intelligence officer and most of what he wrote was marginal in France. Nobody knew of him.

What are the key ingredients that define the French School of DGR or the French School of counter-rebellion?

To grasp how the French School of CREB (counter-rebellion) tried to respond to insurgencies, we must first understand the context they operated in, especially how they came to view revolutionary warfare.

In his conferences, Lacheroy always began with the misunderstood originality and deceptive effectiveness of revolutionary warfare. Although its first stages are low in intensity as to seem almost harmless, it is *not* small war or guerilla under another name, but the most accomplished form of total war as it involves the whole of society and puts at stake vital interests, like the two World Wars. As he observes, “In Indochina, as in China, as in Korea, as elsewhere, we note that the strongest seems defeated by the weakest.”

While the guerilla is a mere tactic, revolutionary warfare is a comprehensive strategy, the overriding purpose of which is to control the population. This is made possible by a “system of parallel hierarchies”, in other words a grid of local and territorial communist-infiltrated organizations, with the hierarchy of the communist party, also known as the “OPA”, the enemy *political and administrative organization*, at the top. Together, they progressively replace normal

administrative structures and ensure the “control of the bodies” and the “control of the souls” – i.e. the morale and ideological reorientation of the population, effected through “*action psychologique*” (indoctrination, “auto-critique”, and denunciations). Once complete control is achieved in a given region, military operations are progressively scaled up, beginning with terrorist attacks and moving up to guerilla and then full-scale conventional operations. As is well known, standard Maoist revolutionary warfare unfolds in three phases but can also be encountered in degraded forms, as in Algeria.

The French DGR School is fully aware that the control of the “bodies” is a necessary precondition to that of the souls: rallying the population behind a given ideal is pointless if it is not tightly controlled. However, faced with such a systematic strategy that relies upon the *total* mobilization of the population across all lines of operations, counterinsurgents must first convince themselves that the ideological battle is the key to ultimate victory and that military operations cannot by themselves solve the problem. Accordingly, counterinsurgents have no other choice than to reciprocate in kind and rely on “*action psychologique*” (information and propaganda) and “*guerre psychologique*” (disinformation, infiltration, torture) as needed. At the strategic level, “counter-rebellion” must be waged as a total war.

Tactically, the DGR people keep underlining the uselessness of operations when the right conditions are not met, namely a reasonable level of actionable intelligence, a 6 to 1 force ratio, the ability to hold the zones that have been cleared, and the permanent presence of territorial forces, if possible drawn from the local population. Absent those conditions, operations are dangerous and even counter-productive, as they reveal the fecklessness of the counter-insurgent and expose the population to insurgent reprisals. Other than that, they favor mixing local outposts with units out in the field and on the move, called the “whirlwind technique” (*tourbillon*) or “*nomadisation*”. As soon as an area has been cleared, pacification should start right away and be accompanied all along by “*action psychologique*”.

From Bernard Fall’s writings, there is this tendency to see counterinsurgency as a competition in governance. But governing is also about resolving the legitimate grievances of the local people. How important was this issue for the DGR doctrinaires – mitigating the grievances of the locals that triggered and mobilized their support for the insurgents?

This competition in governance is not the way the DGR proponents observed COIN. What they did was to apply the recipes of the communists they were fighting. They had a very totalitarian view of society at war. For them the local society had to be literally remodeled from the inside through “*action psychologique*,” in order to counter communism effectively. That was their primary obsession.

Their wars were taking place after the 1940 trauma and in a decolonization context: it was therefore very difficult for them to accept another defeat or to acknowledge the fact that the locals had legitimate grievances. Obviously, this is the major weak spot of the French COIN School of the ‘50s and ‘60s. They were not given a free reign by political authorities to define the political objectives of the campaign, but on the contrary were supposed to keep Algeria French. So they ended up in a situation where the political dimension of the struggle was in many respects lost from the start. It is then no wonder that they failed to articulate a political strategy or message able to attract the local people. Unable to prevail in terms of legitimacy, the DGR people did not really try to organize a “competition in governance”, but regarded governance as a technical issue. Let’s not forget here their anti-communist obsession: what they

had in mind was to replicate revolutionary techniques, for instance by organizing youth organizations in every village in order to emulate and counter communist structures.

However, other traditions within the French military, especially from the colonial branch, were much more favorable to the hearts and minds approach and succeeded in pushing their agenda forward with the creation of *Sections administratives spéciales* (special administrative sections), in charge of social and economic development at the local level. Overall, the French military and administration did build schools and roads, and tried to improve the everyday life of the Muslim population in Algeria, but all these development projects (propaganda by the deeds) were insufficient and could not answer or accommodate the political grievances of the local population.

Since Algeria was not an imperial possession but an integral part of French territory, with over one million *Pieds-noirs* (French citizens of various origins who lived in French Algeria before independence), and, the objective of the war was to maintain French rule, not to dismantle it – unlike British COIN in Malaya for instance. Therefore, the military as a whole was not only intellectually unwilling, but also not mandated, to design a proper answer at the political level. Algeria is not Vietnam a few years later or Afghanistan today.

How different is the Galula's population centric mind-set from the ones articulated by Charles Lacheroy and Roger Trinquier which were focused primarily on the "control of the bodies and souls"?

The most totalitarian of all of them was probably Lacheroy who wanted the complete control of the bodies and souls through propaganda. In fact, the true zealots of DGR, such as Hogard and Lacheroy, emphasized first and foremost psychological warfare and propaganda which they intended to use exactly like the communists – hence the creation of the *5^e bureaux*. Trinquier was less concerned by propaganda and, after the battle of Algiers, very much focused on the physical control of the population and extermination of the enemy OPA, advocating for instance the systematic lockout of urban areas, the relocation of isolated rural communities in controlled hamlets, or the widespread use of extralegal police measures and harsh interrogation techniques up to torture. This is obviously completely different from winning hearts and minds, which they did not have much faith in. *Basically, Trinquier believed that "if you take them by the balls, hearts and minds will follow"*. It was certainly his way of looking at things. Their emphasis was on control rather than consent.

Galula, on his part, lies somewhere between British-American "hearts and minds" and the French DGR school – probably closer to the former. He is certainly convinced that the "control of bodies", the physical control of people, is a necessary precondition to success, but he also wants the local people to actually rally around a political project. Galula is different precisely because he understands that local grievances have to be taken seriously. Providing the locals with more money, more education, more roads, or stuff like that, is not enough, which is why he wants to create some sort of local national parties with ramifications everywhere in order to counter communist propaganda. In the long run, he would probably have contemplated some kind of deal (in a British way) or compact with the local population and elites, whereby refusing communism would sometime down the road be rewarded with independence. In this as well, Galula had a different mind-set and was probably less nationalistic than Lacheroy. Then again, we should remember that Galula is not representative of the French COIN School of the '50s and '60s and had no influence on the French strategic debate of that time.

A question raised again and again by the critics is that despite tactical success and creativity in counter-rebellion operations, France lost Algeria. Isn't here an explicit warning? Or put another way - what are the strategic lessons that should be learned from the Algerian colonial experience?

The warning is quite obvious I think: you can get the tactics right, you can have all the required numbers and all the expertise, but as long as the political strategy is not right you are not going to win. *Tactical brilliance is for naught if the enterprise is flawed at the strategic level.* It is as simple as that. The classic expression is that in Algeria, the French won militarily, but lost politically. This is nonsense. Victory always happens at the political level. There is no such thing as a purely military victory unless you are ready to physically exterminate your enemies to the last one. In the real world you win when the loser decides it is time to stop.

The lesson for today should be this: *you cannot use tactics to fix a political context.* One of the main strengths of the Taliban compared to us is that they are locals and their nationalist and religious narrative can be quite compelling to many Afghans. What is exactly the counter-narrative that we are proposing?

What should we learn today from the DGR people's failed public relations experience to manage their public opinion/internal audience back home? To what extent is the public opinion a center of gravity in what we call today a war among people?

In a Western democracy, public opinion back home is certainly a center of gravity for any COIN campaign that is long and costly enough to appear on the radar screen. It was the case back in the '50s and '60s and still is today. The main lesson to be drawn from the French experience in this respect is twofold.

First, "be careful what you wish for, you might very well get it": since they had felt abandoned in Indochina by the French people, the professional military demanded and got that the draft be mobilized for Algeria and that the whole nation be committed. This ensured that the right numbers and troop ratios would obtain, but also fueled controversies and war fatigue back home, culminating in a political countdown toward war termination. Mobilizing the population generally comes with a heavy price tag attached to it: the non-negotiable need to show quick results.

Second, total war cannot be decreed, neither by the military, nor even by the government. Ultimately, as Clausewitz pointed out, it is the people that decide whether the stakes at hand are vital or not. In the case of Algeria, the French people accepted for a time that Algeria was part of France, but the political, human, and moral costs of the war, from casualties to the use of torture, ensured a continuous erosion of support, so much that the public was ready to follow De Gaulle and grant independence to Algeria in the end. Accordingly, it is essential to have a good sense of where the public is susceptible to lie in the long haul, before embarking on very ambitious war aims or even grand rhetoric.

Coming back to the legacy of the DGR School and that of Galula's COIN template, which is today their relevance in an environment where we have to deal not with a Maoist insurgency, but with a post-Maoist type of insurgency?

People tend to forget that Galula was writing in a completely different context, that of the Cold War – and the most tensed period of the Cold War at that. He took for granted – and this is

something that he shared with Lacheroy and Trinquier – that the West was engaged in an existential struggle against communism. In other words, the campaigns in Algeria and Indochina were perceived as parts of a global war against communism. In this context of total and global war, Galula regarded the reliance on “total” means such as conscription, large number of troops, near unlimited funding and high acceptance of casualties as naturally justified. We ought to remember that the French deployed in Algeria around 420.000 soldiers which is more than what the Americans deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan together.

When people cite Galula, Trinquier and all this generation, they should bear in mind that they were engaged in a different kind of war – a war which to them clearly encompassed vital interests and required almost endless military means. This is not the case today, as Afghanistan is foreign territory. Algeria wasn't, and Vietnam had been a French colony for decades. That's why Algeria was never regarded as a counterinsurgency war, but as a counter-rebellion operation. The difference with our present interventions is therefore huge, if only in terms of stakes. Today, we have limited interests at stake and must operate with constrained resources, yet our militaries are under constant media attention.

To me, whether we deal today with Maoist, pre-Maoist or post-Maoist insurgencies is quite significant at the operational level, especially regarding the importance of the enemy OPA. However, as the mind-sets and role-models of the Cold War era are inappropriate anyway, the fundamental question is rather – *should we fight like Galula, Lacheroy or anyone from that generation? Wouldn't be wiser to rather look at what was done back in the 19th century by the French or the British?* Hubert Lyautey seems more fitting as a model than Galula or the generation of the 50s or 60s, because he was operating within a much more constrained environment in terms of resources and commitment. The present situation seems indeed much closer to 19th century colonial interventions.

Which are then the key ingredients of the pacification recipe (especially its social and political dimensions) used by Lyautey and Gallieni in the 19th century, that could be useful to us today?

Gallieni and Lyautey were acutely aware of the limited nature of the campaigns they led. At no point were they under any illusion as to whether France would bear endless costs to extend French influence or sovereignty over distant colonial outposts.

However, the lessons to be drawn from this era lie not only at the strategic, but also at the political and tactical levels. They would always strive to rally to them the local elites (“govern with the mandarin and not against him”) and population, through a shrewd mixture of what we would call development and governance: opening markets hand and giving elites a stake in the new colonial order, and more often than not showing restraint in the use of force. In this respect, they were much more successful than their later counterparts in implementing a truly integrated approach blending “the combined action of force and politics”, if only because they were organized in a clear and simple way that ensured unity of command. Tactically they would rely both on locally recruited troops and on specialized, colonial regiments, which ensured long-term presence, knowledge of the terrain, and continuity of action.

We must therefore pay close attention to the lessons of that period and the teachings of commanders such as Gallieni and Lyautey, especially when we claim to follow their methods without really understanding them. For instance, the “oil spot” method that they pioneered is most of the time improperly implemented: instead of securing a given zone and let it expand

from the inside, by political and economic attraction as it were, we nowadays try to extend it actively and rapidly, by clearing successive zones and hoping that they will somehow connect. Of course, colonial warfare should not be idealized either: the direct targeting of civilian populations through razzias was part and parcel of pacification, and the overall project of colonialism is not only different from, but actually quite at odds with Western values and objectives in current interventions. However, pacification as a body of on-the-ground techniques distinct from the political project of colonialism still has much to offer, and seems much more in harmony with today's state building interventions and general conditions.

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